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An admiral at the CIA?

President Carter struck a nice balance in appointing Adm. Stansfield Turner to be director of central intelligence. Conservatives who opposed Carter's first nominee, Theodore Sorensen, because of his past espousal of nonviolence will find no comparable grounds for objecting to a senior naval officer. Liberals should be gratified by Turner's brilliance and catholic interests: Philosophy, politics and economics were his subjects at Oxford as a Rhodes scholar four years after he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy.

But liberal-conservative balance alone would be inadequate to qualify someone to head the CIA and coordinate other foreign intelligence activity. He must also be independent-minded, experienced in management and analysis, able to reach sound conclusions from conflicting information on matters of extraordinary importance to the country. For example, the proliferation of Soviet nuclear-weapons systems and the pressure for the United States to respond in kind are generating a major debate about future strategic policy. In these circumstances, top-quality CIA leadership is indispensable.

Turner seems likely to provide it. His successful career is an indication of his over-all abilities. His reputation as a personable but demanding leader, willing to experiment and innovate, suggests that he would do well at CIA. Especially noteworthy is his intelligent, nondogmatic approach to strategy. In an article in the current Foreign Affairs magazine Turner wrote of the need to look at differences in military missions and trends, not merely at absolute numbers of men and equipment. He warned against the overstatements sometimes made by his colleagues, but he did not hesitate to describe what he considered comparative U.S. strengths and weaknesses.

Senate hearings on Turner's appointment will no doubt probe deeply into his views and qualifications. That's as it should be. The CIA's crucial job of intelligence-gathering requires a person of highest competence to head the agency. Its record of lawbreaking in past years requires that reforms be pursued energetically by a director of unquestioned integrity. If Turner meets those qualifications, the country will be well served by his confirmation.